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Things you wouldn't tell your mother; You wouldn't tell a stranger on a bus about your sexual habits, so why do millions of people freely reveal information like this on **social networking sites that can be viewed by anyone? Will their openness come back to haunt them? Alison George reports on the end of privacy as we know it**

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COLS likes a smoke and has tried many different drugs. He has three piercings and is in the process of tattooing his arm. He earns between \$75,000 and \$100,000 a year and doesn't see his dad.

I know all about Cols even though I have never met him and probably never shall. Five years ago only a close friend of his would have known such personal details about him. Yet thanks to his profile on the **social** networking website MySpace, I even know the first thing he thinks about in the morning.

There's nothing unusual about this. Millions of people share some of their most personal details with total strangers on the internet via sites such as MySpace, Friendster and Facebook. The dangers this can pose to children are well publicised, but it also has powerful if less well known implications for us all. The sheer volume of personal information that people are publishing online - and the fact that some of it could remain visible permanently - is changing the nature of personal privacy. Is this a good thing, or will the "MySpace generation" live to regret it?

The change has been made possible by the way **social** networking sites are structured. They allow users to create a profile of themselves for others to peruse, and to build **networks** with hundreds or thousands of people who share their interests or just like the look of their page. It's an opportunity to present yourself in a way you want others to see you. Many people reveal everything from their musical tastes and political and sexual orientation to their drinking and drug habits and their inner thoughts and feelings. And it's a very recent phenomenon. "There is no real-world parallel. You don't go walking round the mall telling people whether you are straight or gay," says Fred Stutzman, a researcher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who studies identity and **social networks**.

What's more, people can end up having multiple identities online. The picture you present of yourself on the dating site Match.com, for instance, will likely be different to the one you give on Facebook, restricted mainly to universities and high schools. This can be confusing if someone is trying to find out more about you by searching on Google - if they're thinking of employing you, for example, or dating you. In recognition of this online identity crisis, Stutzman and his colleague Terrell Russell have set up a service called ClaimID (claimid.com) that allows you to track, verify, annotate and prioritise the information that appears about you online, so that when someone searches you they get representative information.

Such a service could prove increasingly useful for people entering the workforce with a few years of **social** networking behind them. Tasteless in-jokes are fine within the **network**, says Stutzman. "But when you're going for that job interview, they can really come back and bite people." A survey by the US National Association of Colleges and Employers published in July found that 27 per cent of employers have Googled their job candidates or checked their profiles on

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social networking sites. It is not just employers who are interested in your online revelations. US college athletes who posted pictures of themselves behaving badly on their **social** networking profiles unwittingly found themselves on Bob Reno's badjocks.com site, which publishes stories about scandals in sport.

How does this happen? Offline, it is easy to compartmentalise the different aspects of your life - professional, personal, family - but online, where **social networks** are so much larger and looser, the distinctions become blurred. These issues have not gone unnoticed by **social network** providers. They are reluctant to offer too much privacy because this makes it harder for users to communicate with people they don't know. Yet too little privacy means that users lose control over the information they post. "There is a fine balance between protecting and revealing - for users as well as providers," says Alessandro Acquisti of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who researches privacy and information security and is looking at the difference between online and offline behaviour.

In everyday life, says Acquisti, we are better equipped to manage our privacy - we are unlikely to give strangers our phone number and date of birth. So why do some people give out this information freely online? According to Acquisti, it's because people expect that the more information they give, the more they gain from the **network**. His research also shows that some users are not well informed about the reach of the **network**, and how their profile could potentially be viewed by millions of people. Internet researcher Steve Jones of the University of Illinois at Chicago agrees. "A **social network** where you create a circle of friends feels private," he says. "It's more of a feeling of a website shared with a small, closed group of people."

For those wishing to keep out prying eyes, most **social networks** do offer additional privacy tools. Users of MySpace and Facebook can choose to reveal their profiles only to friends, for example. But recent research shows that many users don't make use of these tools, even if they are worried about privacy. A survey of Facebook users published in June by Acquisti and his colleague Ralph Gross found that even among users who were concerned about a stranger knowing their address or class schedule, 22 per cent still gave their address on their Facebook profile, and 40 per cent published their class schedule.

What can be done to prevent what Acquisti and Gross call "an eternal memory of our indiscretions"? Some recommend drastic measures. "Anything you put on the internet has the potential to be made public and you should treat it as such," says Jones. "If you put something on MySpace or Facebook, ask yourself whether you would be comfortable shouting it out at a family reunion. If the answer is no, then don't put it up." As newspapers report more stories about students being kicked off their courses and bloggers being sacked because of their online revelations, users might well feel compelled to tighten up their online privacy. This semester, students moving into campus accommodation at the University of California, Berkeley, will even be required to attend a class in **social** networking to make them aware of the risks.

It could go another way, though. As people become more tolerant of online openness, we could see a shift in attitudes and a rethinking of what we consider private. "People tend to adapt to new environments of revelations," says Acquisti. "The new generation may be used to people talking online about their drug use and sex lives."

Their attitudes may depend on what profession they end up in. Lindsey, a law student in Philadelphia who we contacted, has noticed some interesting trends among her friends. "Friends who work as DJs, record-store owners or graphic designers express themselves far more freely than friends who work in more traditional professions," she says. She has also noticed that most of her friends who are teachers don't have online profiles. "They've realised that there's nothing worse than walking in to teach your calculus class only to have them holding copies of the photograph of you on the beach."

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